

Analysis of senior volunteering and the effects of COVID-19

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Introduction

Both national and international institutions have been implementing active aging policies since 2002. This new way of understanding old age favours the social participation of older people. Senior volunteering is an example of social commitment in this policy framework of active aging. Despite its growing social and political relevance, investigations on this topic are scarce in Spain ([Serrat et al., 2020](#)) and even less in Extremadura. Understanding this reality is necessary to adopt social policies to improve seniors' lives.

COVID-19 is affecting all age cohorts, especially older people. This research qualitatively analyses the effects on the lives of elderly volunteers. The pandemic's social, economic, and political impact has been evident, although not people have experienced it equally. Such is the case for vulnerable populations, including older people ([Aquino-Canchari et al., 2020](#)). Considering mortality statistics, people 60 years and older constituted a high-risk group due to the severity of the disease in this population cohort ([Aquino-Canchari et al., 2020](#)). The after-effects of confinement on emotional and psychological health of older people will last over time, in addition to the physical problems associated with being locked up ([Pinazo-Hernandis, 2020](#)). Social isolation in the aging population is a public health problem due to the psychological and physical adverse effects ([Armitage and Nellums, 2020](#)). However, the confinement and COVID-19 restrictions, while preventing contagion, had other impacts on the health of older people. It seems clear that the health impact for people who actively participate in society, such as volunteers, will be more significant and even more so for those who live alone.

Aim and methodology

This research is part of the R&D&I project Escenarios de envejecimiento activo en Extremadura: Propuestas de intervención, funded by the Regional Government of Extremadura and the European Regional Development Fund for the study and improvement of the situation of older people in the Autonomous Community of Extremadura. The aim is to analyse the effects on senior volunteers of an unprecedented COVID-19 situation and the consequences of the health measures adopted.

This study followed a qualitative methodology using the focus group technique. Fourteen retired people over 65 years of age participated. They were divided into two equal focus groups representative of the reality of senior volunteering in Extremadura. Participants were contacted by e-mail, and the focus groups were conducted through the ZOOM platform.



Direct contact with the participants was not possible due to health restrictions. Both groups had an average duration of two hours and were recorded with the explicit consent of the participants. The sessions were divided into three thematic blocks on the individual and general view of volunteering; questions on the dynamics of volunteering; and finally, the participants' social and inner circle perception of volunteering.

Senior's volunteering in the pandemic

The impact of the pandemic on the older population has been remarkable. Older people were deprived of social relationships and activities that made them feel like active members of society. Volunteering can take over the work functions for retired people, thus avoiding the adverse effects of the transition to old age (Dávila de León and Díaz-Morales, 2009). Consequently, we can predict that the impact of temporarily moving away from volunteering is analogous to those experienced in the retirement process. This symbolic similarity between the idea of work and volunteering can be appreciated in the following quote:

I am also a volunteer through AVIMEX in penitentiary institutions, where I have been for four years until the... the pandemic has prevented me from continuing my work (Male, AVIMEX).

The cessation of activities due to the pandemic has led to detrimental psychosocial effects among older volunteers.

One of the benefits of volunteering is the help in the creation of networks and social relationships derived from belonging to an association (Sánchez Casado, 2015). Inevitably, the stoppage or modification of the activities of senior volunteering organizations had consequences on the social relationships among volunteers. The need to socialize is so relevant that some have continued with the relationships despite having stopped attending volunteering actions:

And now, we continue, as we cannot physically attend the hospital, we have a WhatsApp where we write to each other every day (Woman, AECC).

Despite the restrictions and the impossibility of carrying out many activities in person, the associations have adapted to continue providing volunteer services. Significant examples are the modification of some activities, or the acceptance of young people as volunteers:

As we have already said, we are all older. As I said before, last year, with the COVID issue, a platform of young people emerged, and this year they joined us because the law on volunteering already allows us to do so (Man, UDP).

At the same time, other organizations were aware of the problem of being an association exclusively for older people, especially in terms of generational change, as volunteers have ended up as users.

Similarly, they have adapted to new forms of communication to relate to users and colleagues. The telephone has been one of the essential devices for maintaining contact between volunteer-user or between members of the organization themselves (calls and WhatsApp). In this sense, the virtual meeting has become a fundamental tool.



The pandemic has been an extra motivation to get involved in ICTs:

At this time of the pandemic, we are recycling ourselves, we could say, because we have to get up to speed and we are learning to use ZOOM and a bunch of things, but I think they are relevant and, in some way, we are very interested in increasing ICT acknowledgment. (Woman, AVIMEX)

The confinement and use of new technologies have also had negative consequences. The digital divide is a problem that affects many people, as it has different dimensions, such as cultural and educational level, socioeconomic level, gender, geographical and generational difference, and access to technology (Rodríguez Gallardo, 2006). In our research, the problem was not a lack of knowledge about ICTs, as many are familiar with ICTs due to their work experience or interest in digital literacy initiatives. Instead, it was the lack of access to technological resources at home, in rural and urban areas. Therefore, as this participant explains, older people know, but they do not have the resources:

And the members of AVIMEX, well, as I said before, at the moment, we are a little bit paralyzed by the pandemic and by the technological issue that many people do not have sufficient means at home (Woman, AVIMEX).

Conclusions

The pandemic has highlighted some of the benefits and problems of senior volunteering. Firstly, we have seen the importance and strength of the social relationships created, either with the users or among the volunteers themselves. In this sense, knowledge and access to new technologies have been crucial, although the need for physical contact is evident.

Secondly, the digital literacy workshops for older people have had positive results. These initiatives are indispensable in integrating older people into the telematic society and keeping them in touch with their environment. However, one of the problems of enclosure has been the lack of resources at home, including access to the Internet. We have also detected a shortage of new volunteers, which poses a significant problem for the organizations in the medium and long term since it is common for volunteers to become beneficiaries.

As a result, it seems necessary to design digital accessibility programs to make these new technological resources available to the whole of Extremadura society. On the other hand, dissemination, and awareness-raising campaigns on work of senior volunteering are necessary to change the negative image of old age and to promote these leisure and free time investment activities among senior citizens.

